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ABSTRACT

Most research conducted on the amount of time English language learners (ELLs) require for the acquisition of academic English suggests that 4-10 years are required to be near or on par with fully proficient English (FEP) peers. In this study, data from three administrations (1999, 2000, and 2001) of the FCAT writing test of the Florida Writing Assessment Program were examined. The scores of over one million FEP students were compared with over 178,000 ELLs with varying exposure to academic language. Among other findings, the data suggest that ELLs required 3-5 years at the 4th grade level and 5-6+ years at the 8th and 10th grade levels to achieve parity in academic language as represented by the FCAT writing test. This finding was consistent across three genres of writing and all three administrations of the FCAT writing test under study. These findings are generally within the 4-10 year time frame suggested in previous research. The results of this study suggest that 4th grade ELLs have less to catch up than their older ELL peers. (Contains 38 references.) (Author/SM)

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ESL Learners, Writing and the Acquisition of Academic Language

Rashid A. Moore; Hanizah Zainuddin

Most research conducted on the amount of time English language learners (ELLs) require for the acquisition of academic English suggests that 4-10 years are required to be near or on par with fully English proficient (FEP) peers. In this study, data from three administrations (1999, 2000, and 2001) of the FCAT writing test of the Florida Writing Assessment Program were examined. The scores of over one million FEP students were compared with over 178,000 ELLs with varying exposure to academic language. Among other findings, the data suggest that ELLs required 3-5 years at the 4th grade level and 5-6+ years at the 8th and 10th grade levels to achieve parity in academic language as represented by the FCAT writing test. This finding was consistent across three genres of writing and all three administrations of the FCAT writing test under study. These findings are generally within the 4-10 time frame suggested in previous research. The results of this study suggest that 4th grade ELLs have less to catch up to than their older ELL peers. Finally, the study demonstrates that the very measures supported by standardized test proponents can also generate data sets which refute the notion that ELLs need only 1-2 years of support, test accommodations, or one-time exemptions before they can compete successfully with FEP students on measures of academic language proficiency such as state-mandated standardized tests.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges faced by schools is the increasing number of English language learners (ELLs) who arrive at schools with varying degrees of English language proficiency. Their varying proficiencies may appreciably affect their level of participation in English-only classrooms and ultimately their success in school. While research evidence strongly supports the notion that that the length of time necessary to learn academic language is influenced by many interrelated factors such as age, length of exposure to the target language, length of residence, level of heritage language proficiency and previous schooling, significant studies have also underscored that all ELLs can eventually achieve the same curriculum standards as their English proficient (FEP) peers given enough time, approximately 4-10 years (Cummins 1979, 1981, 2001; Collier, 1987, 1989, 1992; Klesmer, 1994; Thomas & Collier, 1997).

States and school districts have concerned themselves with the question of determining these curriculum standards and selecting or creating tests to see if those standards are being met, often at the behest of state legislatures and the general public (Phelps, 1998). States and individual school districts have gravitated toward standardized tests such as the SAT-9 and STAR in California, the TAAS/TAKS in Texas, the MCAS in Massachusetts, the ISAT in Illinois, the HSGQE in Alaska and the FCAT in Florida. The problems with standardized tests are numerous (Kohn, 2001, 2002), such as precipitating teaching to the test or its scoring rubric (Mabry, 1999), potential bias against language minority students (Jones and Ongtooguk, 2002), and inappropriate use of commercial standardized tests with ELL populations (Butler, Orr, Gutierrez, & Hakuta,

2000). Nevertheless, states are turning to standardized tests such as the FCAT writing test to determine the rate of academic language acquisition by ELLs.

Despite the limitations of a single essay test like the FCAT writing test, this standardized test of writing ability is used statewide in Florida for both ELLs and FEP students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. In addition, Florida disaggregates the results of ELL and FEP performance on standardized tests like the FCAT writing test as do California, Wisconsin and Utah (Christie, 2002). If the performances of the ELLs can be disaggregated according to their relative lengths of exposure to academic English, a comparison of performances between these ELL groups and their FEP peers can add to existing findings on the question of how long it takes for ELLs at various grade levels to be on par with FEP students on standardized measures of grade-level academic language proficiency. Although many states require ELLs at some point to take such standardized tests, no large scale studies have been published which used the FCAT essay writing test as a measure of the academic language proficiency of ELLs. Therefore, the purpose of this study is threefold: 1) to investigate the length of time a large ELL population takes to develop grade-level, academic language proficiency (defined as achieving parity with their FEP peers on the FCAT writing test) across three grade levels, three genres and three years of test administrations; 2) to investigate whether or not 4th graders require less time to achieve parity than 8th and 10th graders; and 3) to investigate whether the passing rates on the expository component of this standardized essay test will increase across the three years' administrations of the test. The results will add to previous research conducted on the acquisition of academic

language of ELLs in other school districts, states and provinces conducted in the past two decades.

BACKGROUND

Length of Time for Academic Language Proficiency of ELLs

Large scale studies like those conducted by Cummins (1981), Collier (1987, 1989, 1992), Collier & Thomas (1989), Klesmer (1994), Mitchell, Destino & Karam (1997), Thomas and Collier (1997) and Hakuta, Butler, and Witt (2000) have investigated the length of time ELLs require to acquire academic language proficiency by analyzing student achievement on standardized, grade-level, norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests given in English as measures of students' eventual attainment of parity with their English proficient peers. Utilizing longitudinal and cross-sectional samples from geographically-dispersed school districts, three important findings clearly resonate from these studies: The first finding is that ELLs require on average 4-10 years to develop academic language proficiency on-grade level with their FEP peers. Some ELLs who have little or no prior schooling and no primary language support can take the most time, from 7 to10 years, while those who have L1 schooling and home language support tend to acquire academic language proficiency earlier in the 4-7 year time frame. The second significant finding was that ELLs can attain FEP-like passing percentage rates on a district-level, criterion-referenced test of writing within 4-7 years. The third significant finding is that ELLs in the earlier grade levels tended to make the most dramatic gains (Thomas & Collier, 1997, p.34). However, in the first 2-3 years of exposure to English in the classroom, ELLs tend to acquire social language much more quickly than academic

language (Cummins, 1996; Hakuta, Butler & Witt, 2000) which may give teachers, administrators and policy makers the false impression that ELLs have caught up with their FEP peers in academic language proficiency as well.

Standardized Testing of Academic Language Proficiency of ELLs

Despite a large body of evidence suggesting ELLs need on average 4-10 years to acquire academic language proficiency, many school administrators and state policy makers are skeptical about this length of time (Thomas & Collier, 1997, p.33). Holmes and Duran (2000) note that most state policies only grant ELLs exemptions from taking state standardized tests of one year or one time only (Maryland, Minnesota, Texas and Virginia) and some states two years only (Florida, North Carolina). Despite the two-year exemption in Florida, the state requires these students to take high-stakes tests to gain familiarity with the test although their test scores are not reported in school performance reports. While the idea that ELLs should be familiar with the essay test format would help them in the long run with writing conventions and rater expectations, there are also concerns that schools and policy makers may have unrealistic expectations that ELLs can become academically proficient in a relatively short time (Thomas & Collier, 1997, p.33) and use such information to make decisions that could affect ELL promotion and graduation. While some states are providing testing accommodations for ELLs in an apparent attempt to level the playing field (Holmes & Duran, 2000), there again appears to be an assumption that ELLs should be able to compete with FEP students within a year or two given these accommodations, despite over two decades of research which

indicates they need on average 4-10 years to attain parity in academic language proficiency.

Writing, Genre and Academic Language Proficiency

Writing, of course, is an integral part of academic language proficiency. Cumming (2001) points out that a common performance genre that is used to assess second language writing proficiency is the timed essay test. Timed essays often favor three common genres of academic writing: narration, exposition and persuasion. Scardamalia and Bereiter (1987) distinguish between these types of writing in terms of the processing model of writing development, namely the distinction between *knowledge-telling* and *knowledge-transforming* ability in writing. When writers use knowledge-telling processes in composing written texts, their goal for writing is often to tell as much information as they know and find a way to express content information. This type of processing is typically required of narrative writing at lower grade levels. An example FCAT writing narrative task prompt used at 4th grade level that focuses on knowledge-telling ability would read like this: *Tell a story about a special time with a friend* (Florida Writes!, 1999). However, students in the upper grades must demonstrate more than simple narrative. In expository and persuasive writing, students must exhibit higher order thinking and reflection as they go beyond giving a simple description to providing an explanation or justifying a position on an issue (Derewianka, 1990). Unlike narrative writing, exposition and persuasion require a knowledge-transforming ability in writing. Examples of FCAT expository and persuasive task prompts that focus on knowledge transforming ability are to "explain why a particular day is special" (Florida Writes!,

2000) and "convince a friend to eat at your favorite place" (Florida Writes!, 2001) respectively. Because writing often requires a conscious effort, a great deal of practice, and explicit instruction, it is logical that some ELLs may take a longer time to develop sophisticated composing skills.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study presented below is to examine how long ELLs take to acquire academic language proficiency as measured by an essay test which requires ELLs at various grade levels to utilize both knowledge-telling (narration) and knowledge-transforming (exposition and persuasion). The study addresses three research questions:

1. Will the FCAT writing mean scores of those ELLs who have been exposed to academic language the longest be comparable to their FEP peers within the 4-10 year period in three separate writing genres, grade levels and test administration years?

2. Will the time required by 4th grade ELLs to catch up with their FEP counterparts be shorter than the time required by their 8th and 10th ELLs to catch up to their grade FEP peers?

3. Will the passing percentage rate on the expository component, the sole genre tested over all three grade levels, increase across the three years' administrations of the test?

METHOD

Unlike previous studies that used smaller sample sizes to generalize to an ELL population, this cross-sectional, non-interventionist study takes virtually the entire population of ELLs in the state of Florida over a three year period and compares their standardized essay mean scores and passing percentage rates with those of the entire population of fully English proficient students. Formulas are used to calculate the average length of exposure to academic language for various ELL groups to determine when parity or near parity with FEPs is achieved. Parity or near parity is defined as obtaining a group mean score within .1 of the FEP mean score or better on a scale of 0-6.

DESCRIPTION OF THE POPULATION

The population under study comes from data reported by the Florida Department of Education for the FCAT writing test for 1999, 2000 and 2001. Virtually the entire population of ELLs classified as limited or formerly limited English proficient and the entire population of fully English proficient students (FEPs) are included in this study. The ELL groups for all three years totaled over 178,000[1], while the FEP population to which the four ELL groups were compared was over 1,000,000. Over 200 languages were spoken by the ELLs in each of three years under study. Spanish was most heavily represented in the population, followed by Haitian Creole, French and Brazilian Portuguese. ELLs were deemed by the state to be limited English proficient if they did not pass standardized oral/aural tests at the K-12 grade levels, and reading and writing

[1] Approximately 98.7% of the ELL population were included in this study. The remaining 1.3% were excluded from this study because inferences could not be drawn about the relative length of exposure to academic language through placement in, or exit from, an ESL program. They are designated as LP and LN in the original data tables at the OMSLE site (Statistics, 2002).

tests at the 4-12 grade levels. The average length of time ELLs were served by ESL programs varied according to grade level. At the 4th grade level, the average length of time served in an ESL program was approximately 3 years. At the 8th and 10th grade levels, the length of time served ranged between 3.8 to 4.4 years. If the ELLs passed both the reading and writing components of standardized language proficiency tests such as the LAS or IPT [2] at the 33rd percentile or above at the end of the time they served in an ESL program, then the ELLs were exited and monitored for two years in their mainstream classes.

The FCAT Writing Test

The unit of measurement for academic language proficiency for this study, the FCAT writing test, measures writing proficiency in different genres of essay writing at the 4th grade (narration and an exposition) and at 8th and 10th grade (exposition and persuasion). Students have 45 minutes of time to read the writing prompt, plan, write & edit a single, 5 paragraph essay. Papers are scored using a holistic scoring rubric (see Appendix A) that highlights four components: focus, organization, support, and conventions. Anchor papers are set for each grade level. The condensed versions of 4th, 8th, and 10th grade FCAT writing prompts from 1999 to 2001 are found in Appendix B. Although passing the FCAT writing test at the 10th grade is not yet a requirement for high school graduation, Florida public schools are increasingly emphasizing instruction in the 5-paragraph essay format and encouraging teachers to assess their students with the holistic scoring rubric of the writing test.

[2] Language Assessment Scales and Idea Proficiency Test

The FCAT writing test was selected as the unit of measurement for academic language proficiency for several reasons, the first three of which centered on its statewide use, links to the curriculum and Florida teacher input into the essay test. First, the FCAT writing test is currently the only statewide assessment of writing ability at the elementary, middle, and high school levels for both ELLs and FEP students. Consequently, the relative performances of large numbers of ELL learners in Florida could be viewed and compared with their FEP peers at different grade levels. Second, the FCAT writing test is directly linked to the Florida Sunshine State Standards and the competencies found in Florida's System of School Improvement and Accountability which emphasize the importance of writing instruction and students' development of writing skills in language arts and other subject areas. (Florida Writing Assessment Program, 2002). Third, this criterion-referenced writing test was developed and validated by committees of practicing classroom teachers in Florida and curriculum specialists at the Florida Department of Education. These last two reasons meet one of the requirements of the American Educational Research Association position statement on high-stakes testing - that the test and the curriculum should be aligned (Position Statement, 2000).

The FCAT was also selected in terms of genres tested, high interrater reliability and relative lack of cultural bias. This essay test is a direct assessment of three genres of writing typically assigned in academic writing. In fact, the testing organization FairTest concedes this essay test is an improvement upon other writing tests in that it assesses writing in multiple genres (FairTest, 2002). Inter-rater reliability has been consistently in the .90s and writing prompts go through committees that expressly look for cultural bias

toward language minority students so as to minimize the impact of lack of cultural and relevant background experience in their answers (Florida Writes!, 1999-2001).

Procedure

Data Collection

Data were obtained on the FCAT writing test for 1999, 2000 and 2001 from the website of the Office of Multicultural Student Language Education (OMSLE) of the Florida Department of Education (Statistics, 2002). The OMSLE reports the scores obtained on the FCAT Writing Assessment for 4th grade, 8th grade, and 10th grade in writing expository and narrative essays at the 4th grade level, and expository and persuasive essays at the 8th and 10th grade levels. The codes for four groups of ELLs and one group of Fully English Proficient (FEP) peers have been changed from the original FDOE-designated names[3] and reordered to reflect their position in relation to placement in or exit from an ESL program and to make them more comprehensible to the readers of this study. The codes for the 4 ELL groups and 1 FEP group are as follows:

- (ESL<2) = ELLs enrolled in ESL programs[4] for less than two years before the administration of the FCAT writing test.
- (ESL>2) = ELLs enrolled in ESL programs for more than two years before the administration of the FCAT writing test.
- (EXIT<2) = ELLs who exited an ESL program within two years of the administration of the FCAT writing test. These ELLs are still being officially supported and monitored by their schools

[3] The original FDOE data were encoded LY<2 (ESL<2), LY>2 (ESL>2), LF (EXIT<2), LZ (EXIT>2) and ZZ (FEP) and can be found at Statistics (2002).
[4] ESL programs in the state of Florida primarily consist of self-contained and pull-out classes.

- (EXIT>2) = Former LEP students who exited an ESL program more the two years before the administration of the FCAT and are no longer being officially supported and monitored by their schools

- (FEP) = Fully English Proficient (FEP) students

Formulas for Calculation of Academic English Exposure

Two formulas were applied to obtain an approximation of how long the ELLs had been exposed to academic English. For the less exposed groups (ESL<2 and ESL>2), the following formula in Figure 1 was applied:

Figure 1

Formula for Calculating Length of Academic English Exposure of ESL<2 and ESL >2

Average length of Academic English exposure	=	Number of years of time served in ESL programs

For the more exposed groups (EXIT<2 and EXIT>2), another formula was applied to determine the average length of exposure to academic English. Because the EXIT<2 and EXIT>2 groups were already exited from an ESL program at the time of the FCAT writing test administration, the average lengths of time that these ELLs as a group were classified as limited English proficient by the state of Florida for each of the three grade levels (4^{th}, 8^{th} and 10^{th}) were included. This average length of time was added to the number of years that the ELLs had been exited from ESL programs prior to taking the FCAT writing test to obtain the average number of years of exposure to academic language as shown in figure 2:

Figure 2

Formula for Calculating Length of Academic English Exposure of EXIT<2 and EXIT>2 groups

Average length of Academic English exposure	=	Average length of time served in ESL program	+	Number of years exited from an ESL program

The average length of exposure to academic English for fully English proficient students was set as the number of years that most FEP students attend school in the K-12 system in the United States: five years by grade 4, 9 years by grade 8 and 11 years by grade 10. The average numbers of years of academic language exposure for all five groups were then added to the Florida DOE data to obtain the relative lengths of time necessary for ELLs to attain parity with their FEP counterparts.

Data Analysis

The data sets for each year were examined for the length of academic English exposure (*Average Years of Academic English Exposure)*. The lengths of academic language exposure for all subgroups were calculated using the two formulas mentioned earlier. To find out if ELLs who have been exposed to academic language the longest were comparable to their FEP counterparts within the 4-10 year period, test scores of this group (EXIT>2) were compared to the FEP scores for each grade, genre, and year from 1999-2001. This analysis reveals if there is a relationship between relative length of exposure to academic English and academic parity with FEPs. To ascertain if the time required by 4th grade ELLs to achieve parity with their FEP counterparts is shorter than those required by 8th and 10th grade ELLs, test scores of 4th grade ELLs in two writing

genres over three years and their length of exposure to academic English were compared to those of 8th and 10th grade ELLs. This analysis helps to establish if there is a relationship between when exposure to academic English began and academic parity with FEPs. Finally, to determine if the passing rates of ELLs have been rising over the three years under study for the exposition, the sole writing genre tested in all three grade levels, the expository passing percentage rates for all three years are compared. This analysis helps to establish if the greater emphasis in the Florida public schools on the FCAT writing test format and scoring rubric have impacted expository passing rates.

RESULTS

The data for all five language proficiency groups (ESL<2, ESL>2, EXIT<2, EXIT>2 and FEP) for the three years of the FCAT writing test under study are presented in Tables 1-9 below. Tables 1-3 represent the data from the administration year 1999, Tables 4-6 for 2000 and Tables 7-9 for 2001.

Length of Academic Exposure and Academic Parity with FEP Students

The first research question asked whether ELLs with the longest exposure to academic English achieved parity with their FEP counterparts. The results displayed in tables 1-9 suggest that the (EXIT>2) achieved parity or near parity with their FEP counterparts after 5-6+ years across all three administration years, three grade levels and three genres of the FCAT Writing tests. In all 18 groups (3 grade levels x 3 years x 2 genres each year) EXIT>2 students were within the threshold of .1 of FEP mean scores or

TABLE 1
FCAT Writing Results (Expository and Narrative)
1999 STATE TOTALS FOR GRADE 4

Language Proficiency Status	Number of students with **EXPOSITORY** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Number of students with **NARRATIVE** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Average Years of Academic English Exposure
ESL<2	789	2.2	37	788	2.4	48	<2
ESL>2	2020	2.5	47	2057	2.6	54	2-3.0
EXIT<2	3541	2.8	61	3478	3.1	72	3-5
EXIT>2	3134	3.0	72	3126	3.3	83	5
FEP	62373	2.9	67	63739	3.3	79	5

Average number of years served in ESL Programs by the 8th grade: 3.0 years

TABLE 2
FCAT Writing Results (Expository and Persuasive)
1999 STATE TOTALS FOR GRADE 8

Language Proficiency Status	Number of students with **EXPOSITORY** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Number of students with **PERSUASIVE** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Average Years of Academic English Exposure
ESL<2	875	2.4	47	886	2.1	34	<2
ESL>2	1396	2.8	65	1319	2.6	52	2-3.99
EXIT<2	1174	3.3	85	1160	3.1	75	3.99-5.99
EXIT>2	5152	3.4	90	5148	3.3	84	5.99+
FEP	57512	3.5	91	57259	3.4	86	8+

Average number of years served in ESL Programs by the 8th grade: 3.99 years

TABLE 3
FCAT Writing Results (Expository and Persuasive)
1999 STATE TOTALS FOR GRADE 10

Language Proficiency Status	Number of students with **EXPOSITORY** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Number of students with **PERSUASIVE** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Average Years of Academic English Exposure
ESL<2	785	2.2	33	759	2.1	32	<2
ESL>2	967	2.6	49	995	2.5	45	2-3.8
EXIT<2	913	3.1	73	938	3.2	75	3.8-5.8
EXIT>2	4098	3.5	89	4200	3.5	87	5.8 +
FEP	46854	3.6	89	46754	3.6	88	10+

Average number of years served in ESL Programs by the 10th grade: 3.8 years

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TABLE 4
FCAT Writing Results (Expository and Narrative)
2000 STATE TOTALS FOR GRADE 4

Language Proficiency Status	Number of students with **EXPOSITORY** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Number of students with **NARRATIVE** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Average Years of Academic English Exposure
ESL<2	1994	2.1	38	1945	2.1	39	<2
ESL>2	2642	3.0	70	2609	3.0	70	2-3
EXIT<2	3813	3.3	83	3805	3.3	85	3-5
EXIT>2	3262	3.5	88	3340	3.5	90	5
FEP	67527	3.3	85	67595	3.4	87	5

Average number of years served in ESL Programs by the 4th grade: 3.0 years

TABLE 5
FCAT Writing Results (Expository and Persuasive)
2000 STATE TOTALS FOR GRADE 8

Language Proficiency Status	Number of students with **EXPOSITORY** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Number of students with **PERSUASIVE** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Average Years of Academic English Exposure
ESL<2	1694	2.6	55	1620	2.3	46	<2
ESL>2	1756	3.3	80	1634	3.0	71	2-4.09
EXIT<2	1299	3.8	94	1326	3.4	88	4.09-6.09
EXIT>2	5971	3.9	96	5941	3.6	93	6.1+
FEP	62834	4.0	96	63069	3.7	94	8+

Average number of years served in ESL Programs by the 8th grade: 4.09 years

TABLE 6
FCAT Writing Results (Expository and Persuasive)
2000 STATE TOTALS FOR GRADE 10

Language Proficiency Status	Number of students with **EXPOSITORY** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Number of students with **PERSUASIVE** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Average Years of Academic English Exposure
ESL<2	1558	2.4	45	1586	2.2	37	<2
ESL>2	1385	3.0	64	1387	2.7	53	2- 4.1
EXIT<2	1087	3.7	85	1173	3.5	83	4.1-6.1
EXIT>2	5134	4.1	92	5051	3.9	90	6.1+
FEP	56322	4.1	93	56242	4.0	91	10+

Average number of years served in ESL Programs by the 10th grade: 4.1 years

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TABLE 7
FCAT Writing Results (Expository and Narrative)
2001 STATE TOTALS FOR GRADE 4

Language Proficiency Status	Number of students with **EXPOSITORY** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Number of students with **NARRATIVE** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Average Years of Academic English Exposure
ESL<2	2013	2.7	56	1875	2.7	55	<2
ESL>2	2713	3.3	82	2824	3.1	75	2-3.1
EXIT<2	3713	3.6	91	3744	3.5	88	3.1-5.1
EXIT>2	3539	3.7	94	3609	3.6	91	5.1
FEP	67053	3.7	91	66763	3.6	89	5

Average number of years served in ESL Programs by the 4th grade: 3.1 years

TABLE 8
FCAT Writing Results (Expository and Persuasive)
2001 STATE TOTALS FOR GRADE 8

Language Proficiency Status	Number of students with **EXPOSITORY** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Number of students with **PERSUASIVE** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Average Years of Academic English Exposure
ESL<2	2032	2.6	51	2106	2.3	38	<2
ESL>2	1646	3.2	77	1694	2.9	61	2-4.4
EXIT<2	1425	3.8	94	1430	3.4	85	4.4-6.4
EXIT>2	6270	4.0	96	6156	3.6	92	6.4+
FEP	61598	4.0	96	61814	3.7	92	8+

Average number of years served in ESL Programs by the 8th grade: 4.4 years

TABLE 9
FCAT Writing Results (Expository and Persuasive)
2001 STATE TOTALS FOR GRADE 10

Language Proficiency Status	Number of students with **EXPOSITORY** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Number of students with **PERSUASIVE** prompt	Mean score	Percentage Passing with 3 or higher	Average Years of Academic English Exposure
ESL<2	1844	2.7	55	1836	2.5	41	<2
ESL>2	1318	3.2	71	1372	2.8	58	2-4
EXIT<2	1144	3.7	91	1102	3.4	76	4-6
EXIT>2	5013	4.0	96	5026	3.9	89	6+
FEP	54268	4.1	97	53912	3.9	89	10+

Average number of years served in ESL Programs by the 10th grade: 4.0 years

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better. The range of mean scores for all 18 EXIT>2 groups was 3.0-4.1, all passing scores (the minimum passing score is 3.0), with the average mean scores in the higher end of the range in the 2000 and 2001 data. The EXIT>2 group also had the highest passing percentage rates of all ELL groups across grade levels, genres and years. On the other hand, the lowest mean scores and passing percentage rates were obtained for those ELLs who were currently serving in an ESL program for less than two years (ESL<2). The ESL<2 group mean scores ranged from 2.1-2.7, scores which are generally considered to be failing grades.

Time of Exposure to Academic English and Academic Parity with FEP students

The second research question asked whether 4th grade ELLs with the longest exposure to academic language (EXIT>2) would achieve parity with their FEP counterparts more quickly than would the 8th and 10th grade groups. While EXIT>2 achieved parity in 5 years in all 6 groups (tables 1, 4 & 7), the ELL group with the second longest exposure time, EXIT<2, also reached the threshold of being within .1 of the FEP mean score in 5 out of 6 groups in 3-5 years. At the 8th and 10th grade, it was in the vicinity of 5.8-6.4 years. This would imply that 4th grade ELLs (EXIT>2) would have begun their exposure to academic English at a much younger age (approximately around 5 years old) than the 8th and 10th grade counterparts (approximately around 8-10 years old). Although it appears that ELLs who started off younger in age would be more likely to catch up with their FEP counterparts within a shorter time frame than those students who started later, the shorter length of catch up time exhibited by 4th grade ELLs (EXIT<2 and EXIT>2) can also be explained by difference in rater expectations for

elementary, middle and high school writers. The anchor papers for the 8th and 10th grade FCAT writing test are linguistically more complex and exhibit greater maturity of ideas than those for the 4th grade because more is expected from middle and high school students. In short, there was simply less distance to cover for the 4th grade ELL in order to achieve parity with their FEP counterparts in academic language proficiency. The results for the 4th grade support Thomas & Collier's (1997) contention that ELLs in the earlier grade levels tend to make the most dramatic gains.

Impact of FCAT Writing Test Instruction on Exposition

The third research question concerned whether or not the expository passing rate has risen for all grade levels and language proficiency levels over the three years under study. A comparison of passing rates on the expository test across all 5 language proficiency groups for three consecutive years under study (figures 3-5) sheds light on the question. What is striking about the data is that the percentages of expository passing scores have generally risen (with two exceptions for the ESL<2 and ESL>2 group in figure 4) over the three years of FCAT writing across language proficiency levels and grade levels. For the ELL group with the most exposure to academic language, EXIT>2, the passing rates have increased over the three years under study from 72%-94% in the 4th grade, from 90% to 96% in the 8th grade, and 89%-96% in the 10th grade.

In fact, the passing rates for the narrative and persuasive tests have also risen for the EXIT>2 group. The passing rate by 2001 was at its lowest at 89% in 10th grade on

persuasion (Table 9) and at best 96% in exposition and persuasion at the 8th and 10th grades (Tables 8 & 9). This passing rate of 89-96% was similar to the 90% passing rate found by Hakuta, Butler & Witt (2000) in a study of ELL performance on a district-developed, criterion-referenced writing test after 4-7 years of academic language exposure (p.10). These results may be explained by the fact that writing which is similar in format is being increasingly required in at least the 4th, 8th and 10th grades in the Florida public school system. Thus, all ELL language proficiency levels are becoming increasingly familiar with the writing format assessed by the FCAT Writing test. Although some researchers in testing might view familiarity with the test format a form of test pollution (Haladnya, 1992), the FCAT writing test is a criterion-referenced essay test and an increasing passing rate implies that ELLs are increasingly meeting the

Figure 3
Expository Passing Percentage Rates for 4th Grade ELLs and FEPs
1999-2001

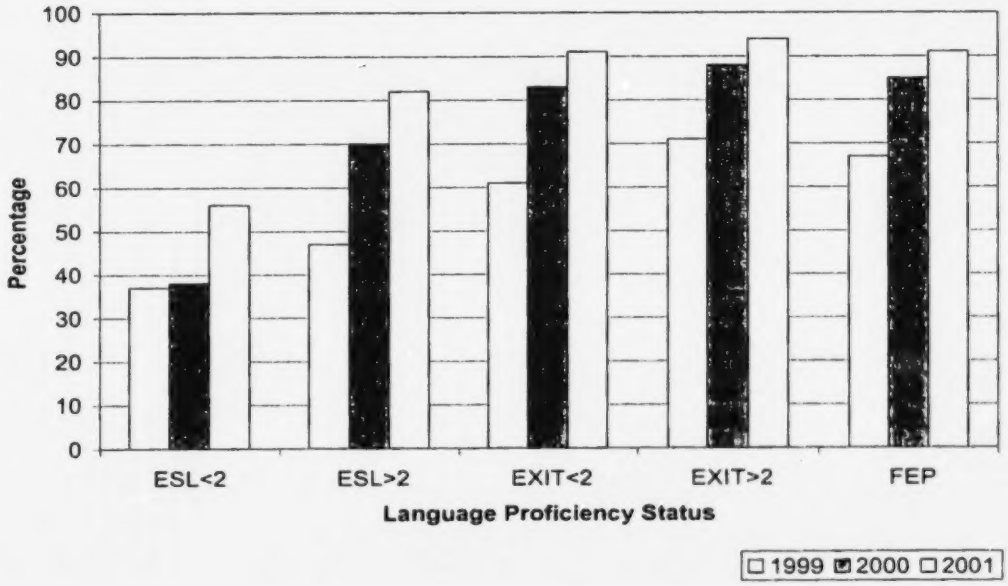


Figure 4
Expository Passing Percentage Rates for 8th Grade ELLs and FEPs
1999-2001

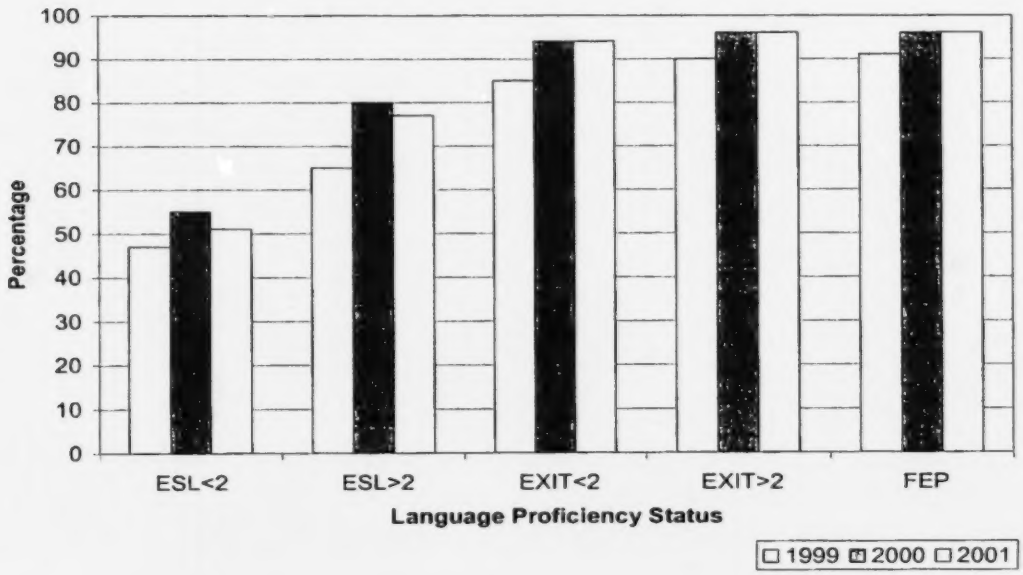
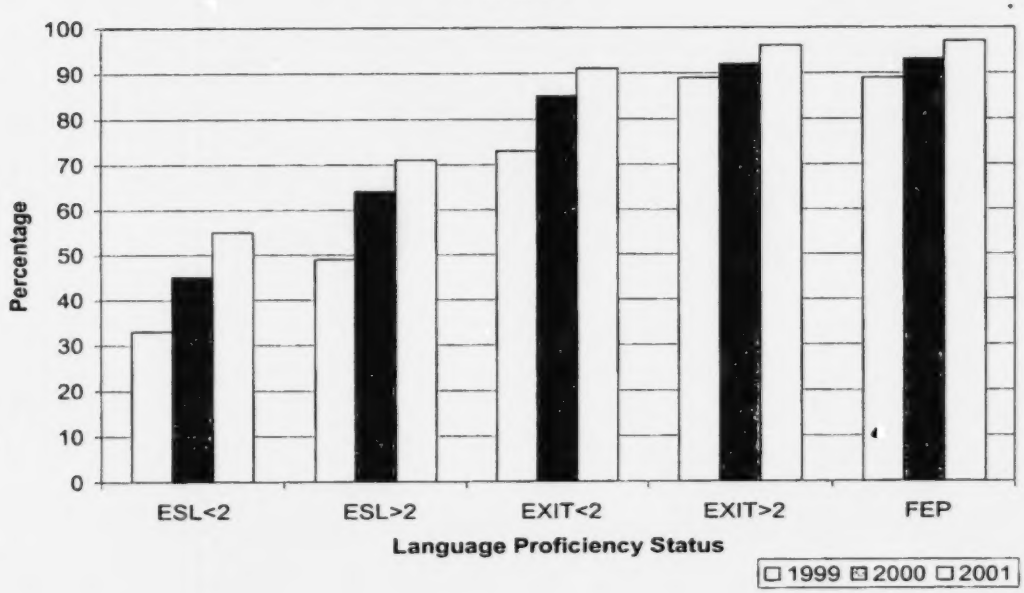


Figure 5
Expository Passing Percentage Rates for 10th Grade ELLs and FEPs
1999-2001



minimum criteria for writing essays in performance genres valued by both the K-12 education system and tertiary education (Cumming, 2001).

DISCUSSION

The first research question asked whether ELLs with the longest exposure to academic English achieved parity with their FEP counterparts. This study found that 4th grade ELLs needed 3-5 years to catch up, while 8th and 10th grade ELLs needed 5-6+ years to catch up on a single writing task. Such a finding should inform classroom teachers, school administrators, legislators and other policy makers of the dangers of prematurely exiting ELLs into mainstream classrooms and declaring them ready to compete with FEPs on high-stakes tests after a 1-2 year exemption. As the data suggest, ELLs do not perform at the same level as their FEP peers within the first 2-3 years. Further, providing ELLs with test accommodations such as extra time, bilingual dictionaries, or explained directions (DPS: 97-054, 1996) did not bring to parity with FEPs the group with the least exposure to academic language, ESL<2. This should help dispel the view that test accommodations given to ELLs within their first 2 years of academic language exposure are sufficient to allow them to achieve parity with FEP students.

Since the ELLs with the longest exposure to academic English achieved parity with their FEP peers in passing the FCAT writing test at increasingly higher rates in the three years under study, it is plausible that the FCAT writing test can bring about positive backwash effects despite growing concerns about test-driven curricula (Mabry, 1999). If

requiring more writing in the classroom allows students to develop and support arguments, then the backwash effects of the test could be positive. This is particularly true in classrooms in which little writing is done outside the paragraph, sentence or "fill-in-the-blank" levels. In this study, it appears that EXIT>2 group has profited from the length of exposure to academic language as measured by the FCAT writing test. Yet, as FCAT writing preparation has permeated the Florida public schools, it is also equally plausible that the EXIT>2 group may have had greater familiarity and practice with the writing test format. In either event, since the timed, 5-paragraph essay is a part of academic writing and accepted as an implicit performance genre in second language writing (Cumming, 2001), then exposure to it would constitute exposure to academic language. Even within a restrictive 5 paragraph format, teachers of ELLs can still help their students acquire academic language proficiency, exercise higher order thinking and find their own voices in their written work (Dean, 2000). In addition, concerns such as those of Ruetten (1994) and Hamp-Lyons & Condon (2000) about ELLs being at a disadvantage when writing such timed essays can be addressed by teachers though explicit instruction in writing conventions, genre characteristics and visible scoring criteria particular to an essay test. This would better equip ELLs to plan for, write, revise and evaluate their academic essays.

On the other hand, placing an overwhelming emphasis on 5 paragraph essays can lead to highly negative backwash effects. One such effect would be an emphasis on standardized tests like the FCAT writing test which could lead to a narrowing of the curriculum and limit experiences with other disciplinary writing genres, such as science

experiment write-ups, film scripts for video projects, or extended research papers in multiple content areas. A narrow, unstimulating test-driven curriculum can turn FEPs and ELLs alike off of writing and learning in general (Wasserstein, 2001). Even worse, such a limited test-driven curriculum could eventually discourage ELLs from completing high school or considering college (Valenzuela, 2000).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Caution should be exercised against making sweeping generalizations about the academic writing proficiency of students based upon a single writing assessment (Florida Writing Assessment Program, 2002) for several reasons. First, performing at FEP levels of achievement as indicated by the FCAT writing test does not imply that ELLs are proficient in writing genres other than narration, exposition and persuasion in a timed, five-paragraph essay format. Ideally, a portfolio, which samples ELL work across content areas, disciplinary genres and points in time, would be a better gauge of ELL academic language development than would a single standardized essay test in timed format (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). Unfortunately, until such time arrives when this type of portfolio is used at the statewide level, the only way to compare ELLs with FEP peers on a large scale is with a state-mandated standardized test. A second limitation of the study was the cross-sectional design. Hakuta, Butler, and Witt (2000) point out that a longitudinal design in studies such as these would allow for stronger conclusions to be drawn, although they also note that available, large-scale databases generally fall short of this ideal situation and are usually cross-sectional in nature (p. 7).

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the length of time necessary for ELL academic language acquisition on a measure of academic language proficiency mandated by the state of Florida across three grade levels, three writing genres and three years. This study was motivated by theories in second language acquisition which posit a 4-10 year time frame for the acquisition of academic language proficiency by ELLs. In addition to largely corroborating the findings of previous research, the study examined the performance of a very large number of ELLs on a state-mandated measure of academic language proficiency using statistics from the standardized test database of a state Department of Education. Since states like Florida are providing disaggregated data on ELL and FEP performances on standardized measures of academic language proficiency (Christie, 2002), L2 researchers should make use of the data to examine how long ELLs require to attain academic language parity with their FEP counterparts. This is important because standardized tests are at present the ultimate measures of academic language by which ELLs are tested and compared with FEP students, as well as constituting significant measures by which ELLs are promoted or retained in schools, and accepted or rejected by colleges (Thomas & Collier, 1997, p. 34).

It is also important to conduct research in the existing standardized test databases of state Departments of Education for reasons that proponents of standardized testing and quick mainstreaming of ELLs may not have envisioned. The very testing instruments certified as legitimate measures of academic language proficiency can also generate data sets which underscore the danger of assuming that ELLs can reach parity with FEP

students on high-stakes standardized tests within 1-2 years of exposure to academic language. The findings of this study and previous research have demonstrated such a time frame is unrealistic, even with numerous test accommodations. This should prompt policymakers into considering alternative ways of assessing the academic language proficiency of ELLs such as through the use of portfolio assessment until such time as ELLs can attain parity with FEP students.

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APPENDIX A

FCAT Writing Scoring Rubric

6 Points

The writing is focused, purposeful, and reflects insight into the writing situation. The paper conveys a sense of completeness and wholeness with adherence to the main idea, and its organizational pattern provides for a logical progression of ideas. The support is substantial, specific, relevant, concrete, and/or illustrative. The paper demonstrates a commitment to and an involvement with the subject, clarity in presentation of ideas, and may use creative writing strategies appropriate to the purpose of the paper. The writing demonstrates a mature command of language (word choice) with freshness of expression. Sentence structure is varied, and sentences are complete except when fragments are used purposefully. Few, if any, convention errors occur in mechanics, usage, and punctuation.

5 Points

The writing focuses on the topic, and its organizational pattern provides for a progression of ideas, although some lapses may occur. The paper conveys a sense of completeness or wholeness. The support is ample. The writing demonstrates a mature command of language, including precision in word choice. There is variation in sentence structure, and, with rare exceptions, sentences are complete except when fragments are used purposefully. The paper generally follows the conventions of mechanics, usage, and spelling.

4 Points

The writing is generally focused on the topic but may include extraneous or loosely related material. An organizational pattern is apparent, although some lapses may occur. The paper exhibits some sense of completeness or wholeness. The support, including word choice, is adequate, although development may be uneven. There is little variation in sentence structure, and most sentences are complete. The paper generally follows the conventions of mechanics, usage, and spelling.

3 Points

The writing is generally focused on the topic but may include extraneous or loosely related material. An organizational pattern has been attempted, but the paper may lack a sense of completeness or wholeness. Some support is included, but development is erratic. Word choice is adequate but may be limited, predictable, or occasionally vague. There is little, if any, variation in sentence structure. Knowledge of the conventions of mechanics and usage is usually demonstrated, and commonly used words are usually spelled correctly.

2 Points

The writing is related to the topic but include extraneous or loosely related material. Little evidence of an organizational pattern may be demonstrated, and the paper may lack a sense of completeness or wholeness. Development of support is inadequate or illogical. Word choice is limited, inappropriate or vague. There is little, if any, variation in sentence structure, and gross errors in sentence structure may occur. Errors in basic conventions of mechanics and usage may occur, and commonly used words may be misspelled.

1 Point

The writing may only minimally address the topic. The paper is a fragmentary or incoherent listing of related ideas or sentences or both. Little, if any, development of support or an organizational pattern or both is apparent. Limited or inappropriate word choice may obscure meaning. Gross errors in sentence structure and usage may impede communication. Frequent and blatant errors may occur in the basic conventions of mechanics and usage, and commonly used words may be misspelled.

0 Points (Unscorable)

The paper is unscorable because

- the response is not related to what the prompt requested the student to do.
- the response is simply a rewording of the prompt.
- the response is a copy of a published work.
- the student refused to write.
- the response is illegible.
- the response is incomprehensible (words are arranged in such a way that no meaning is conveyed).
- the response contains an insufficient amount of writing to determine if the student was attempting to address the prompt.
  the writing folder is blank.

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APPENDIX B

FCAT WRITING PROMPTS

1999-2001 Narrative prompts (4th Grade only)
(1999) Tell a story about what happened when you walked through an open doorway.
(2000) Tell a story about a special time with a friend.
(2001) Tell a story about a time when you had fun making or building something.

1999 Expository Prompts
(4th grade) Explain why a person is special to you.
(8th grade) Explain why a person is your hero.
(10th grade) Explain why you might choose a particular career.

2000 Expository prompts
(4th grade) Write and explain why a particular day of the week is your favorite.
(8th grade) Write and explain why a particular day is special.
(10h grade) Explain why you might choose to spend a day with a particular person.

2001 Expository Prompts
(4th grade) Write and explain your favorite thing to do after school and why you enjoyed doing it.
(8th grade) Write and explain why one thing was special to you.
(10th grade) Write and explain what you enjoy most about being a teenager.

1999 Persuasive Prompts:
(8th grade) Write to convince your local television station to hire you as a student reporter.
(10th grade) Write to convince someone to do one of your jobs or chores.

2000 Persuasive prompts:
(8th grade) Write to convince your teacher to accept your suggestion about a place to visit on a field trip.
(10th grade) Write to convince the principal to accept your opinions on whether the length of class periods should be changed.

2001 Persuasive prompts:
(8th grade) Write to convince a friend to eat at your favorite place.
(10th grade) Write to convince the school board to accept your choice of a new school holiday

combined *Florida Writes!* reports *(1999, 2000 &* 2001)

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